

## Scholarship and the Blood Libel: Past and Present

Twenty years ago, I presented a paper entitled *From Crusades to Blood Libels to Expulsions: Some New Approaches to Medieval Antisemitism*. Part of that essay attempted to assess significant recent scholarship on the blood libel by distinguished medievalists, notably Gavin Langmuir and Israel Yuval. Here I would like to expand that discussion in multiple ways-- by examining how earlier scholars attempted to refute the libel, by discussing scholarship later than 1997, by assessing scholarly efforts to reveal and analyze genuinely problematic Jewish attitudes and behavior despite the danger of providing aid and comfort to anti-Semites, and by wrestling with the challenges of scholarly confrontation with contemporary falsehoods that Jews reflexively and often properly see as new blood libels.

One of the earliest Jewish denunciations of the libel focuses on two themes that took center stage through the centuries: the prohibition against murder and the prohibition of consuming blood. The anonymous German author of the late thirteenth-century anti-Christian polemic *The Nizzahon Vetus* writes that “no nation was so thoroughly warned against murder as we.” He proceeds to point out that the term “your neighbor” appears in the commandment not to covet but not in “do not murder,” “do not commit adultery,” and “do not steal.” Those prohibitions consequently apply with respect to Jews and gentiles alike. “Moreover,” he continues, “we were also warned against blood more than any nation, for even dealing with meat that was slaughtered properly and is kosher, we salt it and rinse it extensively in order to remove the blood. The fact is that you are concocting allegations against us in order to permit our murder.”

On a technical level, these arguments were not without their complexities, but in the deepest sense they were entirely valid. Thus, some Jewish authorities took the position that the ten commandments were technically limited to actions within the Jewish collective, but any murder

remained unambiguously forbidden by rabbinic law. As to blood, the biblical prohibition applied according to rabbinic understanding specifically to animal blood, and so the a fortiori argument implied here is in the narrow sense incorrect. What is correct is that on an emotional, psychic level, the sense of revulsion toward blood triggered by the prohibition in question and reinforced by rabbinic law certainly led to undifferentiated abhorrence.

The a fortiori argument from the prohibition against animal blood already appears in Frederick II's Golden Bull of 1236, which emerged out of the first formal investigation of the blood accusation. The most detailed formal exoneration of the Jews by a Church official was authored by Cardinal Lorenzo Ganganelli (later Pope Clement XIV) in 1759, though it is a matter of considerable significance that he accepted the validity of two accusations, one of which was the purported murder of Simon of Trent. He argued against generalizing from these cases, but the usefulness of his report was significantly weakened by this concession since even when defenders of the Jews conceded that one could not rule out the theoretical possibility that a deranged Jew might have killed a Christian ritually, perhaps under the influence of the libel itself, the concession was generally limited to the behavior of an individual. In the case of Trent, the allegation applied to an entire (albeit small) Jewish community, and the record underlying the conviction speaks of a carefully thought-out ritual connected to the observance of Passover. To assert the validity of this accusation is to affirm that some Jewish collectives believed that their religion requires or at least looks with favor on the ritual murder of Christians and the consumption of their blood. The door was left open to the perpetuation of the libel.

It is well known that the libel was relatively quiescent in the early nineteenth century--though only relatively-- and then enjoyed a resurgence beginning with the Damascus Affair of 1840 and continuing through the Beilis case in the second decade of the twentieth century. Needless to say, it

was then reaffirmed in Nazi publications. Though efforts to refute it emerged throughout the history of the accusation, scholarly efforts to confront it intensified along with the accusation itself.

The most significant of the various scholarly defenses included: *Efes Damim* (No Blood) by the prominent maskil Isaac Baer Levinsohn, written before the Damascus Affair, which was translated from the original Hebrew into English in the context of the Damascus libel; a work by Daniel Chwolson, a learned convert to Christianity who was probably the Jews' favorite apostate in all of Jewish history; and the most impressive and popular of them all, Hermann Strack's *The Jew and Human Sacrifice*. Strack proffered standard arguments about the prohibition of murder and blood but contributed some new or at least atypical points. He cleverly pointed to the prohibition in Jewish law against deriving benefit from a dead body and noted the requirement that a Jew of priestly lineage avoid contact with the dead. (129-131) In another original argument, he maintained that since Jews are prepared to give up their lives for their religion, they would still be using blood annually if there were such a requirement, and there is no evidence of this in the "law-governed states of Europe" (p. 153). This, however, required the reader inclined to believe the accusation to accept the proposition that a country like Hungary was not law-governed. Finally, Strack provided extensive and powerful evidence that Jewish converts to Christianity rejected the accusation, though he had to recognize that there were exceptions.

At this juncture, the libel was often part of a larger attack against rabbinic Judaism, and medieval assaults on the Talmud going back to Nicholas Donin in the Paris disputation of 1240 were resurrected, refurbished, and expanded. Consequently, refutations of the blood accusation became part of a broader tapestry addressing Jewish attitudes toward non-Jews in general and Christians in particular. The most notorious critic of the Talmud who also promulgated the blood libel was August Rohling, who held academic positions of some stature. The distinguished scholar Franz

Delitzsch wrote vigorous refutations of Rohling's work, but the most wide-ranging response was Joseph Bloch's *Israel and the Nations*. The title itself reflects the broad scope of this learned, impressive work of apologetics, which is simultaneously persuasive and problematic.

To take a central example illustrating both the challenge and the perceived need to resort to a less than wholly candid response, Bloch cites Rohling's assertion that "we (Christians) are not looked upon as idolaters as regards the doctrine of the trinity, but because we worship Jesus as God-man" (p. 44). Idolatry is not really an appropriate term, but if we substitute the Hebrew term *avodah zarah*, which literally means foreign worship while bearing much of the force of "idolatry," this classification of Christianity is in my view an accurate depiction of the view of almost all medieval Jewish authorities and many modern ones. The only appropriate reservation is that many of them did focus on the trinity in affirming that Christianity constitutes *avodah zarah*. Bloch assembled a list of quotations from medieval and modern rabbinic figures affirming that non-Jews are not forbidden to associate the true God with "another being," and he dealt with the worship of Jesus as a God-man by the highly questionable strategy of equating it with an anthropomorphic conception of God, which, against Maimonides, the medieval Talmudist R. Abraham b. David of Posquieres had declared non-heretical. At one point (p. 51), Bloch went so far as to say that Maimonides himself did not consider Christians idolaters. The quotations he cites are authentic, but some are subject to other interpretations; if we substitute *avodah zarah* for idolatry, the assertion about Maimonides is incorrect; and much material pointing in the opposite direction is intentionally overlooked.

Beginning in the 1960's, a reconsideration of the apologetic bent emerged among Jewish historians. The pioneering work in this genre was Jacob Katz's *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, which I have analyzed elsewhere at length. Katz provided a balanced depiction of medieval and early modern rabbinic assessments of Christianity as *avodah zarah* and of Jewish attitudes toward Christians and

Christianity more generally. Beginning in the 1990's, two Jewish historians of stature--Israel Yuval and Elliott Horowitz-- took this non-apologetic approach to new lengths by uncovering and emphasizing Jewish hostility to Christians and in Yuval's case connecting this hostility to the origins of the blood libel. Some observers have seen this historiographical development as a manifestation of an unprecedented Jewish sense of security, connected in part to the establishment of a Jewish state, that diminished concerns of providing ammunition to anti-Semites. Nonetheless-- especially in the first case-- vigorous criticism ensued even, perhaps especially, from Israeli scholars.

Yuval did not merely provide candid acknowledgment of medieval Jewish hostility toward Christians; this was the primary thrust of his work. He rejected the view that such hostility emerged primarily out of persecution; rather, he said, the attitudes of Ashkenazic Jews in particular were rooted in Palestinian texts or traditions that also found expression in early medieval Italy. Moreover, he attributed the persistence of such hostility well after the first crusade to an entrenched traditional attitude since, he says, these Jews did not suffer from "especially severe attacks" in the two hundred years after 1096. His commitment to this position is especially striking when we consider that he illustrates this ongoing hostility by citing a remark by Ephraim of Bonn, who was reacting to the ritual murder accusation at Blois in 1171, where more than thirty Jews were burned to death.

Yuval's central thesis, argued with erudition and panache, is that the blood libel was probably inspired by the Jews' ritualized killing of their own children during the Crusader persecutions of 1096. This is the sort of speculation that is not subject to definitive refutation. As I indicated in the article mentioned at the very beginning of this presentation, the assertion that I find most problematic is his affirmation that the killing of children by some of the martyrs, on rare occasions

even after the immediate threat seemed to have passed, was seen by the Jewish chroniclers--at least in part-- as an effort to arouse God's wrath against Christians, so that He would be inspired to initiate His planned eschatological campaign of vengeance. Yuval strives to be careful in his formulation, but I think that in the final analysis this is a fair depiction of his position, which is not, in my view, supported by any genuine evidence. The chroniclers certainly called upon God to exact such vengeance, but they did not ascribe such intentions to the martyrs themselves.

Horowitz's study, like that of Yuval, aims to expose and document Jewish hostility toward Christians and Christianity. Much of the book is focused on the holiday of Purim and the wild and sometimes violent behavior that it generated. Beyond this central theme, Horowitz demonstrates that Jews really did desecrate crosses and argues that they may sometimes have even taken the opportunity to attack or defile a consecrated host. I am persuaded that instances in which Jews defiled crosses were by no means rare; the evidence for attacks on the host is sparse, and there is not even one instance cited by Horowitz in which Jews planned to obtain a host, succeeded in doing so, and then desecrated it. He quotes me to the effect that "I have little doubt that if...a Jew had found himself in possession of this idolatrous object symbolizing the faith of his oppressors, it would not have fared very well in his hands." I stand by this assessment, but it is worth noting that the previous line reads, "Obtaining a consecrated host was no simple matter, and there is no reason to believe that any medieval Jew bothered to take the risk."

Horowitz also addressed the historiographical record with respect to the acknowledgment by scholars, especially Jewish scholars, of objectionable Jewish behavior, devoting special attention to the mass killing of Christians by the Jews of Israel during the Persian invasion of 614. He points to candid presentations by some historians and suppression of uncomfortable facts by others. In his introduction, he places the work in the context of contemporary events, pointing to

the identification by Jews on the extreme Right of Palestinians and even of some Jews with the biblical Amalek and underscoring the horror of Baruch Goldstein's murder of worshippers in the mosque at the cave of the Patriarchs on Purim. On occasion, he can conflate relatively innocuous behavior with far more serious offenses; thus, the elimination of crosses from scenes in a film to be shown at an International Bible Quiz for Youth in Jerusalem is more or less equated with the action of a Jew who spat at a cross during a Christian procession. In addressing issues with damaging potential, historiographical candor should be tempered by cautious evaluation and rhetorical restraint.

The approaches of Yuval and Horowitz, whatever criticisms they may justly evoke, are the product of responsible, excellent historians. In 2007, an anomalous work on the blood libel by a heretofore serious historian appeared that crossed every red line. Ariel Toaff's Italian publication *Passover of Blood* treated the generally torture-induced testimonies of the Jews of Trent with the utmost seriousness and entertained the possibility that some Ashkenazic Jews may have practiced blood rites that escalated into ritual murder. Under the severe pressure of communal, institutional, and scholarly condemnation he withdrew the volume and produced a more restrained second edition, but the initial work was eagerly embraced by Jew-haters, and an English translation remains available on an anti-Semitic website. In the wake of these developments, Hannah Johnson wrote a book entitled *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation and the Limits of Jewish History*, which attempts to place the recent historiography into a theoretical framework. I reviewed this book in *Speculum* and cannot revisit it here in any detail. She addresses the work of Gavin Langmuir, who saw the blood libel as a product of a Christian inner struggle with religious doubt and a prime example of what he called "chimerical" anti-Semitism. In her view, his work suffers from a "juridical," "binary" approach in which Jews

bear no responsibility at all for their victimization. Yuval, she says, introduced “an ethic of implication,” while Toaff went “beyond implication.” I think she goes too far in rejecting the so-called juridical approach, and I do not find the sophisticated theoretical framework particularly edifying.

In 2015, E.M. Rose published an important study on the earliest libels that points away from theoretical discourse and even from overarching explanations. Rather, she subjects the accusations in Norwich, Bury St. Edmonds, Blois, and Paris to a meticulous examination stressing local issues of a personal, political, or economic character. The message of the book is that these early accusations should be understood in their concrete, limited context and not be “explained” by approaches that are inspired by the overall history of the libel seen through the prism of later accusations. She does not, of course, deny that even the early cases following Norwich were rooted to some degree in the earlier incidents, but she makes an explicit point of avoiding the term anti-Semitism or any equivalent formulation. The book indeed calls into question the persuasiveness of efforts to explain the origins of the libel through factors that transcend local motivations, but the thorough rejection of any generalized reference to hostility toward Jews seems excessive.

In a very different vein, Rose sometimes assigns too powerful a historical role to the libels that she examines. Thus, she says that the burning of the Jews of Blois “constituted a radical reinterpretation of the status of Jews in Christian society, for it contradicted traditional views of Judaism as a divinely ordained stage in the evolution of sacred history...The condemnation of Jews at Blois overturned the notion of toleration, replacing it with a determination that for their perfidy, Jews could be rooted out and killed” (p. 237). This, I think is an extreme overstatement. Jews continued to be tolerated after Blois. Even the more sophisticated effort by Nicholas Donin



that Jeremy Cohen sees as a delegitimation of Jewish toleration did not, in my view, succeed in overturning the fundamental doctrine. And the libel itself, as we have seen, was generally rejected by the Church despite the disturbing recognition and even canonization of purported victims.

At the current historical juncture, the relevance of the blood libel transcends the renewed historiographical interest that we have been examining. First--the libel itself persists in the statements and writings of some not entirely marginal figures in Arab countries and to a lesser degree even elsewhere. Second, it has become such a paradigmatic specter for Jews that some accusations leveled at Israel are reflexively characterized as blood libels. When Menachem Begin resorted to this term to characterize international criticism of Israel for the killings in Sabra and Shatila, he was, in my view, using the term inappropriately. But Israel--and sometimes the Jewish collective--has in fact been subjected to imaginary accusations for which the blood libel metaphor is entirely on point. Thus, Israel poisons Palestinians; it harvests their organs; Jews, thousands of whom are said to have refrained from coming to work at the World Trade Center on that fateful September 11<sup>th</sup>, are responsible in whole or in part for the attacks. A substantial number of academics signed a statement before the imminent outbreak of the first Gulf War alerting the world to the strong possibility that Israel would take advantage of the distraction caused by the fog of war to take action against the population of the West Bank up to and including ethnic cleansing.

Most recently, Duke University Press has published a work by Prof. Jasbir Puar of Rutgers University entitled *Right to Maim* whose thesis has been described as a blood libel. Puar asserts that Israel's policy of shooting dangerous, violent demonstrators or attackers in a manner that avoids killing them if at all possible should be seen as a strategy of maiming the Palestinian

population in order to create a debilitated people more easily subject to exploitation. Written in the highly sophisticated language of theoretical discourse current in certain historical and social scientific circles, it has led a significant number of academics to shower the author with effusive praise.

At the very beginning of the volume, the reader encounters a preface entitled “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” a slogan of the Black Lives Matter movement based on the alleged cry of an unarmed black man killed by a police officer. While the author, whose unequivocal identification with the movement suffuses the entire preface, does not tell us that the victim actually said this, neither does she tell us that two investigations concluded definitively that the assertion that he did is a lie. Thus, the attentive reader knows after five pages that this author suppresses truth in the interest of political/ideological commitments.

Here are some examples of the level of argument in this book.

P. 108: ‘For many on both sides of the occupation, it is better to ‘die for your country’ ...than to face a life with a body that is deemed disabled.’ Thus, “‘not killing’ Palestinians while rendering them systematically and utterly debilitated is not humanitarian sparing of death. It is instead a biopolitical usage and articulation of the right to maim.”

P. 129: Even Puar cannot easily depict the roof knocks and phone calls intended to warn civilians before bombings in Gaza as part of a campaign to maim, but she is undaunted. In the first case, she says, they are useless for residents who are not mobile, and in the latter case they appear more like a “‘reminder of how powerless they are’ given the control that Israel has over the telecommunication networks.” This argument does not even begin to address the undeniable

reality that these tactics constituted efforts to avoid civilian deaths (and maiming), and it underscores the lengths to which Puar will go in pursuing an imaginary thesis.

Similarly, she presents Israeli attacks on Palestinian hospitals and ambulances as part of an intentional policy to debilitate. (p. 133). Here there is not even a gesture toward finding a member of the IDF who indicates awareness of a policy of deliberate targeting of hospitals precisely because they are hospitals. Since some Israeli soldiers have made vigorous, public assertions of unethical behavior by members of the IDF, and it is virtually impossible that such a policy could have been kept secret from every soldier and officer with such inclinations, the absence of such a reference is telling.

Building on a hyperbolic statement by a Gazan Water Utilities official that it would be better if Israel would just drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza (p. 140), she asserts with evident sympathy that he is essentially saying that “it is as if withholding death—will not let or make die—becomes an act of dehumanization: the Palestinians are not even human enough for death.”

There is much more, but these examples will have to suffice in this context.

It is by no means improper to classify this book as the rough equivalent of the blood libel. Moreover, its publication points to an even deeper concern, namely, the corruption of the academy. During the Beilis trial of 1913, the prosecution was hard pressed to find an academic who would testify that the blood accusation is true, and it had to mobilize a priest from Tashkent who was easily, if cleverly, discredited under cross-examination. *Right to Maim* was not only published by a respected university press. It bears an effusive blurb from the prominent academic Judith Butler, and when a talk that Puar delivered at Vassar College on this theme was attacked in a *Wall Street Journal* article, nearly 1,000 academics ranging from distinguished

professors like Rashid Khalidi to graduate students--most of whom have no expertise in relevant fields-- wrote a letter to the president of the university containing a similarly effusive declaration of the quality of her work and her standing as a scholar

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScDn20C13D2HcLpZEEawm4XjIeiFuny7UVylu7vrBbF9a3R5Q/viewform?c=0&w=1>) . Thus, my instinct that a book like this, for all its footnotes

and ultra-sophisticated jargon, should be ignored because of its manifest absurdity, is, I am afraid, misguided. Academics who care about Jews and Israel, and even those who care only about the academy itself, face a daunting challenge.

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